

Revisiting Dennis with former Ocean artist, John Lomax

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

In the process of researching my recent article on the SNES/Amiga platform game, Dennis, I contacted (or *attempted* to contact) most of the people involved in its development. Owing to not being a regular LinkedIn user, artist John Lomax missed the boat, although has since been in touch to share his experiences of working on the movie license tie-in game published by Ocean in 1993. I'm sure you'll agree that these fascinating insights are worthy of a follow-up. Only to make sense of the responses and keep it flowing, I've included some of my comments in between.



John: I really enjoyed the write-up about Dennis - it was my first game at Ocean and certainly had its ups and downs in terms of development... but I really enjoyed working on it.

When I started on the game it was initially just me and Andy (Ivan had left Ocean and Simon was on another project) - I was handed an Amiga and told to start designing some sprites. I certainly struggled for the first month or so trying to find my feet and sprites weren't really my strength at the time (more background work) so Andy had requested another artist from Gary and so Simon was involved in the project. Simon took over all the sprite work and started redesigning the game. Dennis was the first game that Ocean did using an external company to design it. Called at the time 'Dashed Decent Design'. I don't think any of us was blown away with the concept of it (Double Dragon game with mini-games attached) hence Simon shifting the focus to a more typical Ocean platformer.



I'd never heard of 'Dashed Decent Design' before. Just looked them up now and Moby Games says it was a freelance game design firm founded by Richard Hare, *Jon* Hare's brother. Apparently Time Slip (SNES) was "based on an original concept by Dashed Decent Design". Not sure what else they did, but I know Rich has been much busier over the years in his own right.

I had no idea there was an earlier design concept for Dennis either. Double Dragon with mini-games sounds awful. Dennis was hardly a fighter (or a lover), and Warner Bros would never have accepted that given how picky they were over much more trivial details. No wonder *that* got canned. What we got in the end was much more appropriate to the license.

John: The original concept was a little odd given the nature of the movie - one mini-game involved firing a catapult loaded with a pill into a full-screen Mr Wilson's mouth as he slept so not sure it would have made Nintendo's strict submission anyhow.



The NES version being developed next door by Mike and Adrian still used the design ideas however but we cracked on with Simon's rewrite. This was going well for a month or so until Ivan came back and then the dynamic changed a lot. Simon and Ivan clearly didn't get on and this just turned sour when one day I came back into the office and Simon had moved desks out of our room (at the time all 4 of us shared a small office) and I became the messenger between Andy,

Ivan and Simon - even going so far as getting me to hand Andy discs with artwork on because they wouldn't speak to each other.

The atmosphere must have been horrible working in such a small team with half of them not talking. I bet you were relieved to finally put this one behind you.

John: For me, it was great fun to work on - just difficult with both sides not speaking towards the end, even to the point of all of us getting dragged into Gary's office to find out what the hell is going on. I just sat at the back watching Simon slam his fist down onto Gary's desk and point and shout at Andy and Ivan, and unfortunately it wasn't long after that he parted ways from Ocean.

The game gets slated nowadays but I still have fond memories making it though.



Anyway, we carried on for another month until one of the external producers came into the office and told us we had a Commodore deal on the table and as such needed a demo doing. They had found an external company to handle the demo/Amiga port and we needed to supply all the artwork and level maps from TUME. At this point we were perhaps 3-4 months into the game and from the sewer levels onwards the game wasn't finished. We were asked to just make one of the sewer levels impossible to complete by shifting over one of the jumps so Dennis couldn't reach it - but this was only for the demo to help get the deal. Btw we never got a credit on the Amiga game despite providing all the artwork and levels... which was annoying.

Ah, interesting, so there *is* a kernel of truth to the impossible jump rumour. I can see how that could have been Chinese whispered to become the 'deliberate sabotage' story I tried to

get to the bottom of. I don't suppose it would matter much with a demo because that's assumed to be a limited taster deal from the start. The mags could even have revealed it as a joke a few months down the line. Gamers who struggled to get past that point might even have laughed and kicked themselves for wasting so much time on it. Actually, I think you're talking about an *internal* demo just for Commodore's assessment so ignore that. Oops.

John: Yep, the demo was at the time meant to be so they could seal the deal with Commodore to try get into a new A1200 bundle pack.



Regarding the characters - as Simon had moved out of the room, Ivan took over designing and creating some of the sprites including some boss characters... obviously not impressing Simon. I was caught in the middle since I got on

with both parties - but they did a good job, and we were playing Mickey on the SNES so wanted to try some Mode 7 bosses.



The first boss in Capcom's 'The Magical Quest Starring Mickey Mouse' (SNES, 1992)

So Ivan was likely behind those 'made up' non-Dennis bosses. That would explain why Simon couldn't remember where the ideas came from and probably why he disapproved if he was the one more interested in syncing it with the IP.



John: Ivan did indeed do those bosses (and various other sprites - lots of them for the first level in Mr Wilson's house for example). As mentioned me and Andy were big fans of Capcom's Mickey Mouse and loved the Mode 7 bosses so we wanted to emulate some of that.



Pete, the final boss. Created in 1925, he's Disney's oldest (still employed) character.

We had some back and forth with WB at the time regarding likeness of the characters - including Simon having to put Dennis's hairline a pixel higher, then a pixel lower and then asking for something in the middle! And also Walter Matthau's agent didn't like the likeness of his sprite with Simon reworking that a couple of times, resulting in them sending over a photo of Walter, which annoyed Simon to the point of him copying the photo and sticking it over the body. Hence the bizarre Mr Wilson you see in the game smiling and looking towards you.



We had a level or 2 that was dropped - furthest along was the library which was almost done - just ran out of time, and we had a bizarre knock-back from submission for a phallic symbol on sewer level 2. ;)

That's all off the top of my head - sorry it's a bit of a ramble.

Ha-ha! I've heard similarly crazy stories about Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson and Arnie games. It's funny too when publishers get the license to a movie, yet not the individual likenesses of the stars because their agents manage this separately and are hysterically protective over them.

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Thanks again John for taking the time to share your story, and all the superb, previously unknown trivia.

You'll be glad to know that John is still in the business, now occupying the lofty position of head of art at TT Games in Knutsford, Cheshire, where he's worked since November 2006. TT is the parent company of Traveller's Tales (founded in 1989), who of course were responsible for bringing us the magical hack and slash platformer, Leander, and quirky puzzle-platformer, Puggsy. The latter being the one with the evolutionary physics engine that drew so much admiring attention at the time!

Prior to this John founded his own company, Embryonic Studios, and worked as an artist at Warthog Games (*lead* artist in fact), Psygnosis, and Ocean. His credits extend to...

- Jurassic Park Part 2: The Chaos Continues (SNES, 1994)
- Last Rites (DOS, Windows, 1997)
- Starlancer (Dreamcast, Windows, 2000)
- Star Trek: Invasion (PlayStation, 2000)
- Colony Wars III: Red Sun (PlayStation, 2000)
- Rally Championship Xtreme (Windows, 2001)
- Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter (PlayStation 2, Windows, Xbox, 2003)
- Battlestar Galactica (PlayStation 2, Xbox, 2003)
- WipEout Pulse (PlayStation, PSP, 2007)
- TNA iMPACT! (PlayStation 2, PlayStation 3, Wii, Xbox 360, 2008)
- Guinness World Records: The Videogame (iPhone, Nintendo DS, Wii, 2008)
- The Dark Meadow (Wii U, 2011)
- Game Party: Champions (Wii U, 2012)
- Man of Steel (mobile, 2017)
- plus 14 LEGO games for various platforms